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August 13, 1975

DRUGGED VIETNAMESE REFUGEES

The following information was provided by the Pentagon yesterday on the drugging of the Vietnamese refugees who wanted to return to Vietnam and were taken to Guam. Contingency Qs and As which follow have been used in response to reporters' questions.

As South Vietnam began to collapse, about 3,000 Vietnamese made their way into Thailand on Vietnamese aircraft. Although Thai officials allowed the aircraft to land, they stipulated that the Vietnamese could not remain in Thailand. The United States sent C-141s to assist them to other locations.

On May 1, 1975, when South Vietnam had fallen and the last C-141 was leaving for Guam, a group of 13 Vietnamese refused to go. They said that when they had boarded the aircraft in Vietnam, their Vietnamese flight crews had told them that their destination was the Delta region of Vietnam. Near hysteria, they demanded to be returned to Vietnam and threatened suicide if they were not returned immediately. Hours of discussion failed to persuade them that there were no means to take them back. The Thai officials were adamant that they leave Thailand immediately, and the Thai people on-scene to sedate the Vietnamese and take them to Guam with the other refugees, where it was hoped that their repatriation could be made expeditiously.

The medicines used are of a type regularly given in medical situations, including evacuations, for the patients' comfort or where, because of mental or emotional disturbance they may pose a threat to themselves or others. They were administered by U.S. medical personnel at Utao. An Air Force nurse accompanied the flight to monitor their progress en route. No ill effects were noted. Although they were helped aboard the aircraft, all 13 were ambulatory during the flight and all except one, who insisted on being carried off, left the aircraft at Guam without assistance.

Q. What Air Force action was taken?

A. An investigation was conducted at Utao. It revealed that, due to the immediacy of the situation, those concerned believed that their only options for the welfare of the Vietnamese, approximately 170 other passengers, and the crew were either to physically restrain or sedate the 13 objectors. Sedation was considered least harmful to all concerned.

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Q. What type of drugs were administered?

A. The sedative: sodium pentathol; the tranquillizer: thorazine.

Q. What dosage was given? How?

A. Normal dosage for their size and weight. By injection.

Q. Were the Vietnamese forced to take the drugs?

A. The first two Vietnamese were led by the arms into the room where the injections were given. The others followed. No physical force was used to administer the injections.

Q. Where are they now?

A. On Guam awaiting repatriation to Vietnam.

* * * * *

Q. What is the President's reaction to this action?

A. The President is, of course, concerned that the Vietnamese who wish to return to Vietnam are able to do so as soon as arrangements can be made. They are now on Guam awaiting repatriation.

The objective of this decision was not to do injury but to save the lives of these 13 Vietnamese and more than 170 passengers they were to travel with -- none of whom could return to Vietnam or stay in Thailand.